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ABSTRACT

The history of the International Communication Association's Communication Audit is briefly reviewed, and possible benefits and pitfalls of the approach are discussed. Certain assumptions and methods underlying the Communicaton Audit are critiqued. (AA)

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CRITIQUE OF THE COMMUNICATION AUDIT FROM THE ACADEMIC RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

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This paper is intended to provide an informal critique of the "Communication Audit" currently under development by the International Communication Association. It is written from the academic perspective of two individuals who, although having had limited recent direct involvement with the audit's development, have followed it closely from inception. One author (Sincoff), as Executive Secretary and member of the Board of Directors of ICA from 1970-73, served as the audit's initial coordinator of research teams from April 1972 to September 1972. The other author was a member of the Board of Directors from 1968-71 and 1973-76, and was an active supporter of the audit project before that forum.

The remarks which follow are divided into two parts: (1) a general view of the possible benefits and pitfalls of the Communication Audit, and (2) a critique of the audit's assumptions and methods. Please note that we don't presume to be exhaustive in this critique; there are more plusses and minuses than we have chosen to comment upon. The criteria we used in selecting our points of focus were: (1) degree of theoretical importance, and (2) practical pertinence.

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General Benefits and Liabilities:

Approximately five years have passed since the Organizational Communication Division of ICA initiated development of its communication audit research procedure. At the time of its inception, primarily sporadic and non-programmatic research attempts had been made to develop some form of standardized instrumentation suitable for the measurement of presumed-to-exist organizational communication variables. Heavy reliance had been placed on modifying and adapting existing instruments "borrowed" from disciplines other than communication. In this climate, the Communication Audit was born. To the best of our knowledge, it represented then, and represents today, the only broad-based, coordinated attempt by investigators trained primarily in the study of human communicative behavior in organizations to develop standardized instrumentation specifically associated with investigation and classification of communicative variables in complex organizations.

As pilot test data are generated and the audit instruments are refined, the audit should enable ultimately the establishment of a data bank of normative organizational communication data, a set of standardized data-gathering instruments, and a standardized analytical procedure allowing for simultaneous comparisons across different units of the same organization and longitudnal comparisons within the same unit over time. In short, the continuing development of the audit procedure coupled with additional refinement of the audit instruments will provide the researcher with opportunities to use a common yardstick to test and validate theories of organizational communication with greater confidence and precision than has been possible heretofore.

Unfortunately, this perspective leads to potential liabilities of the Communication Audit from the viewpoint of the academic researcher, which leads us to suggest three cautions: (1) Audit data should not be gathered for their

own sake. While audit data are of inherent interest to the theoretician, the practitioner will demand application of the results and guidance in using them. To that end, aside from theoretical speculation and hypothesis testing, at least one member of the audit team should be trained to give guidance in applying audit results. Moreover, a commonly held corporate view of the "outside consultant" (i.e., the communication auditor) is that such an individual has an underlying interest only in scheduling himself for further consultation. We suggest that while the auditor should be prepared to recommend specific courses of action based on the audit's results, he should not imply either covertly or overtly that he is the sole qualified person to effect action outcomes. (2) The audit is a diagnostic technique, not a "cure" for illness. Like any other tool, the audit's merit can be judged positively or negatively depending on how it is used and the behavioral modifications it subsequently generates within the organization. At best it can accurately identify some communicational strengths and weaknesses in the organization; at worst it may promise more than it can produce, kindle false hopes, and ultimately breed mistrust and actually create barriers to effective communication in the organization. (3) The communication audit is only one of many organizational needs-analysis approaches. Researchers in any academic field often tend to view their discipline's training interests as the center of the universe. A communication auditor must maintain awareness that many organizations, business or otherwise, regularly conduct many types of needs-analyses (e.g., "human awareness", budgeting, career path training, etc.). To assume that a communication audit represents the only type of organizational audit is naive.

Critique of Audit Assumptions and Methods:

The overall methodology of the audit procedure has several things to commend it: (1) Its development has been broadly based on a variety of organizations and personnel, which enhances the possibility of making accurate cross-group comparisons, as well as providing a more substantial base for identifying critical variables. (2) In the best systems analysis tradition, the audit itself is constantly subject to iteration and subsequent refinement, thereby helping to insure both its stability over time and its pertinence at a given point in time. (3) It employs a variety (five) of data-gathering techniques, which provides a sounder basis for internally validating the information gathered in an organization, as well as helping to insure breadth of information.

Among the less commendable characteristics of the audit in our view are the following:

(1) The most serious problem is the unnecessary lack of precision in the ways in which the label "communication" is employed. We find this bewildering, in terms of the nature of the audit itself and the professional backgrounds of the developers of the audit. The label "communication" is not employed operationally in a consistent way, and the resulting ambiguity must certainly be counterproductive to the purpose and implementation of the audit and the interpretation of the audit results, from the standpoint of the auditor, subjects, and clients. At various points in the audit process the word "communication" is used synonomously with "information" or "message" (as in the "Questionnaire Survey" and the "Communication Diary" sections of the audit), reflecting an assumption (demonstrably false in our view) that simply receiving (interpreting?) a message stimulus

guarantees "communication". We align ourselves with those theorists and practioners who define communication as the sharing or trans-generation of the experience symbolized by the message stimulus, and therefore reject the assumption that every instance of an individual's information processing activity which results in the assignment (occurrence, incidence, emergence) of meaning necessarily involves communication (making common, or sharing experience with another organism also capable of some ability to process information). In the "Network Analysis" section, "communication" is used synonomously with the notion of "transmission". These kinds of ambiguities lead to the formulation of such notions as "The communication was communicated but no communication occurred," which is so imprecise and ambiguous as to be nonsensical. We find this unnecessary and inappropriate, and in our view certainly should not be tolerated, much less actively encouraged, by professional researchers or practitioners in our field.

(2) In general, we find that the opening instructions to the subjects for each section of the audit are of very uneven quality. For example, consider the instructions for the "Communication Experiences" section: "Check those descriptions which are <u>extremely</u> <u>important</u> to you in your organization," and in the very next sentence, "Check only 5 or 6 descriptions which <u>most</u> <u>critically</u> affect your performance of your daily job." These seem to us to be at least confusing, if not contradictory for conscientious respondents. It also seems to us that some of the instructions are unnecessarily wordy and involved, as in the instructions in the "Network Analysis" section. (This section,

incidentally, exemplifies only too well the unnecessarily ambiguous ways in which the label "communication" is employed.) In fact, we found this section the most difficult and confusing to actually complete.

(3) A final problem area we detect has to do with the Summary Reports, which are an integral part of the total audit procedure. Suggesting, for example, that the relative percent of positive and negative "communication experiences" is an accurate indicator of Communication Climate involves an unwarranted generalization based on insufficient evidence. If anything, extreme caution should be exercised in drawing inferences from any of the data; instead, descriptions should be emphasized rather than inference drawing (which in fact is the case in some of the summaries provided).

The Communication Auditor's most challenging problem may be to sensitize the target organization to an awareness of the pervasive impact of communicative behaviors (good/bad, effective/ineffective) at all levels of the organization, while at the same time selling the client on the benefits of a Communication Audit. Every organization wishing to remain solvent will ask about the bottom line--how much will it cost and what will be its benefits? In short, the client will want some indication of the cost-effectiveness of the audit.

The experience of the audit teams to date provides a sound beginning in offering any organization a systematic and reliable means to satisfy its organizational development needs in an area heretofore devoid of such means. We are entirely supportive of the audit concept, and are confident that it will be continuously refined to improve both its efficiency and effectiveness.